



WebMemo #461

This is a WebMemo On [Sex Education and Abstinence](#)*WebMemo-*

Facts about Abstinence Education

By [Robert Rector](#)

March 30, 2004

In April, the Senate will vote on reauthorization of welfare reform. The Senate welfare reform legislation will include the reauthorization of the federal government's main education program. Despite the overwhelming popularity of education, some groups seek to divert funds away from and into "safe sex" programs. These efforts to redirect funds are usually deceptively labeled as support for "plus" or "comprehensive sex ed" programs. The following facts are important to understanding any debate about the future of education.

Fact: Sexual activity at an early age has multiple harmful consequences.

The earlier a teenage girl begins sexual activity the more likely she is to suffer from increased rates of infection with sexually transmitted diseases, increased rates of out-of-wedlock pregnancy and birth, increased rates of single parenthood, decreased marital stability, increased maternal and child poverty, increased abortion, increased depression, and decreased adult happiness.[\[1\]](#)

Fact: Most sexually active teens say they wish they had waited until they were older before having sex

Nearly two thirds of sexually active teens state that they regret their initial sexual activity and wish they had waited until they were older before becoming sexually active.[\[2\]](#)

Fact: Sexually active teens are more likely to be depressed and to attempt suicide.

Sexually active teens are less likely to be happy, more likely to be depressed, and more likely to attempt suicide. Teenage girls who are sexually active are three times more likely to be depressed and three times more likely to attempt suicide than girls who are not active. Teenage boys who are sexually active are more than twice as likely to be depressed and are almost ten times more likely to attempt suicide than boys who are not active.[\[3\]](#)

Fact: education programs are effective in reducing teen sexual activity.

There are currently ten evaluations showing that education is effective in reducing teen sexual activity. Half of these evaluations have been published in peer-reviewed journals. For example, "Not Me, Not

Now" is a community-wide program in Monroe County, New York. The program broadcasts pro-abstinence messages to teens through the mass media. The program has been successful in changing teen attitudes. The sexual activity rate of 15-year-olds across the county (as reported on the Youth Risk Behavior Survey) dropped 46.6 percent to 31.6 percent. The pregnancy rate for girls aged 15 through 17 in the county fell by a statistically significant amount from 63.4 pregnancies per 1000 girls to 49.5 pregnancies per 1000.. The teen pregnancy rate fell more rapidly in Monroe County than in comparison counties and in upstate New York in general, and the difference in the rate of decrease was statistically significant. [\[4\]](#)

Fact: programs dramatically reduce out-of-wedlock childbearing.

For more than a decade, organizations such as "True Love Waits" have encouraged young people to abstain from sexual activity. As part of these programs, young people are encouraged to make a verbal or written pledge to abstain from sex until marriage. Young women who take a virginity pledge are about 40 percent less likely to have a child out-of-wedlock when compared to similar young women who do not make pledges, according to recently released data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. These dramatic findings are valid even when background factors such as socio-economic status, race, religiosity, and other relevant variables are held constant.[\[5\]](#)

Fact: Government spends \$12 to promote contraceptives for every \$1 spent on abstinence. In 2002, the federal and state governments spent an estimated \$1.73 billion on a wide variety of contraception-promotion and pregnancy-prevention programs. More than a third of that money (\$653 million) was spent specifically to fund contraceptive programs for teens. In contrast, programs teaching teens to abstain from sexual activity received only an estimated \$144.1 million in the same year. Overall, government spent \$12.00 to promote contraception for every one dollar spent to encourage abstinence. If funding for teens alone is examined, government still spent \$4.50 on promoting teen contraceptive use for every one dollar spent on teen abstinence.[\[6\]](#)

Fact: Government spending priorities do not match parental priorities.

Some 85 percent of parents believe that teaching about should be emphasized as much as, or more than, teaching about contraception. Only 8 percent believe that promoting contraception is more important than abstinence.[\[7\]](#)

Fact: "Comprehensive sex education" or " plus" programs are merely safe sex programs wrapped in a deceptive label.

In recent years, a new approach, termed " plus" or "comprehensive sexuality education," has played a prominent role in the public debate over sex education. According to proponents, plus or comprehensive sex ed programs place a strong emphasis on but also contain information about contraception. This approach is presented as the middle ground between "safe sex" and abstinence.

In reality, comprehensive sex ed programs are nothing more than standard "safe sex" programs wrapped in a new label. These curricula have little meaningful content. True curricula devote, on average, 71 percent of their page content to abstinence. In contrast, comprehensive sex ed curricula, on average, allocate only 4.7 percent of their content to ; the overwhelming focus is on encouraging teens to use contraception.

The brief message in comprehensive sex ed curricula is weak and equivocal: comprehensive sex ed does not present as a goal or standard that teens should pursue, but merely as a minor option teens may

consider. Comprehensive sex curricula never urge teens to abstain until they finish high school. Even sentences suggesting that young people should wait "until they are older" before engaging in sex are extremely rare. The principal message that pervades comprehensive sex ed curricula, through repeated example, is that it is okay for teens to have sex as long as they use contraception.[\[8\]](#)

Fact: Parents overwhelmingly support the values and messages of true education.

Polls show that parents overwhelmingly support the main themes and messages of education:

- 79 percent of parents want teens to be taught that they should not engage in sexual activity until they are married or at least in an adult relationship leading to marriage.
- 91 percent of parents want teens to be taught that "the best choice is for sexual intercourse to be linked to love, intimacy, and commitment. These qualities are most likely to occur in a faithful marriage."
- 68 percent of parents want sex education programs to teach that "individuals who are not sexually active until they are married have the best chances of marital stability and happiness."
- 91 percent of parents want schools to teach that "adolescents should be expected to abstain from sexual activity during high school years."

These themes are central to education curricula. By contrast, these messages either do not appear in or are directly contradicted by comprehensive sex ed/ plus curricula.[\[9\]](#)

Fact: Parents overwhelmingly oppose the values and messages of comprehensive sex ed curricula.

Comprehensive sex ed programs teach permissive values that are opposed by nearly all parents:

- Comprehensive sex ed curricula focus almost exclusively on contraception and include little or no material on abstinence. However, only 2 percent of parents believe is not important; only 7 percent believe teaching about contraception should have more emphasis than teaching about abstinence.
- Over 90 percent of parents want sex education programs to teach teens to abstain at least until they have finished high school. Comprehensive sex ed programs do not contain this message, and much of their material implicitly undermines it.
- In page after page of text, and through example upon example, comprehensive sex ed curricula are pervaded by the message that it is okay for teens to have sex as long as they use contraception. As long as "protection" is used, it is difficult to find any example in these programs where voluntary teen is criticized or discouraged. Only 7 percent of parents agree with this permissive message.[\[10\]](#)

Fact: Comprehensive sex ed programs contain sexually explicit material that is offensive to nearly all parents.

Most comprehensive sex-ed curricula contain sexually explicit and offensive materials. For example, curricula have students practice unrolling condoms on bananas, cucumbers, or model phalluses. Curricula also contain discussions of anal sex and homosexual role-playing and encourage teens to practice mutual masturbation and watch erotic movies. Much material in " plus" curricula would be alarming to parents.[\[11\]](#) For example, the curriculum *Be Proud! Be Responsible!* instructs teachers to:

Invite [students] to brainstorm ways to increase spontaneity and the likelihood that they'll use condoms.... Examples: ...Store condoms under mattress; Eroticize condom use with partner...Use condoms as a method of foreplay.... Think up a sexual fantasy using condoms....Act sexy/sensual when putting condoms on.... Hide them on your body and ask your partner to find it. Wrap them as a present and give to your partner before a romantic dinner. Tease each other manually while putting on the condom.[\[12\]](#)

Similarly, the curriculum *Focus on Kids* prompts teachers to:

State that there are other ways to be close to a person and show you care without having sexual intercourse. Ask youth to brainstorm ways to be close. The list may include holding hands, body massage, bathing together, masturbation, sensuous feeding, fantasizing, watching erotic movies, reading erotic books and magazines....[\[13\]](#)

Fact: Claims that parents support comprehensive sex ed or " plus" programs are false.

Organizations such as Advocates for Youth falsely claim that parents support comprehensive sex. These claims are based on the erroneous assertion that comprehensive sex ed programs contain the heavy emphasis on preferred by nearly all parents. In reality, these programs have very little content. In addition, the aggressive promotion of teen contraceptive use, permissive sexual values, and explicit sexual material contained in comprehensive sex ed programs are unacceptable to nearly all parents.

Fact: Most parents want their children to be taught a strong message as well as basic biological and health facts about contraception, but this does not mean that parents oppose authentic education.

In general, curricula focus on and do not teach about contraception. However, in most schools where is taught, students will receive basic information about contraception in a separate class such as biology or health. Most parents support this approach; they strongly support education and do not believe and contraception should be mixed together in the same class.[\[14\]](#)

Moreover, the fact that parents want students taught the basic facts about contraception does not mean they support the aggressive promotion of teen contraceptive use contained in "comprehensive sex ed" programs. Such programs encourage contraceptive use, teach teens how to convince sex partners to use contraception, teach youth how to obtain contraception, and have students practice condom use; the overwhelming majority of parents reject this approach.[\[15\]](#)

Fact: Allowing state public health agencies to use federal funds for comprehensive sex ed or safe sex programs would effectively eliminate federal support for education.

Some policymakers have proposed that state public health agencies be given the authority to divert federal education funds to pay for safe sex/comprehensive sex ed programs. Since most state public health agencies have long been wedded to the safe sex approach to teen sex issues, this change would effectively eliminate most federal funding for education.

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[\[1\]](#) Robert E. Rector, Kirk A. Johnson, Lauren Noyes, and Shannan Martin,, "The Harmful Effects of Early Sexual Activity and Multiple Sexual Partners Among Women: A Book of Charts," The Heritage Foundation, June 26, 2003. www.heritage.org/research/family/abstinence_charts.cfm

[2] National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, *Americans Sound Off About Teen Pregnancy*, National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, December 2003, p. 17.

[3] Robert E. Rector, Kirk A. Johnson, and Lauren R. Noyes, "Sexually Active Teenagers Are More Likely to be Depressed and to Attempt Suicide," The Heritage Foundation, *Center for Data Analysis Report* No. 03-04, June 3, 2003. www.heritage.org/research/family/cda0304.cfm

[4] Robert Rector, "The Effectiveness of Abstinence Education Programs in Reducing Sexual Activity Among Youth." The Heritage Foundation *Background* No. 1533, April 8, 2002. www.heritage.org/library/background/bg1533.html

[5] Kirk A. Johnson and Robert Rector, "Adolescents Who Take Virginity Pledges Have Lower Rates of Out-of-Wedlock Births," The Heritage Foundation, forthcoming, April 2004 .

[6] Melissa G. Pardue and Robert E. Rector, "Government Spends \$12 on Safe Sex and Contraceptives for Every \$1 Spent on Abstinence," The Heritage Foundation *Background* No. 1718, January 14, 2004. www.heritage.org/research/family/bg1718.cfm

[7] Robert E. Rector, Melissa G. Pardue, and Shannan Martin, "What Do Parents Want Taught in Sex Education Programs?" The Heritage Foundation *Background* No. 1722, January 28, 2004. www.heritage.org/research/welfare/bg1722.cfm

[8] Shannan Martin, Robert Rector, and Melissa G. Pardue, *Comprehensive Sex Education Versus Authentic Abstinence: a Study in Competing Curricula*, The Heritage Foundation, forthcoming.

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] Shannan Martin, Robert Rector, and Melissa Pardue, *Comprehensive Sex Education Versus Authentic Abstinence Education: A Study in Competing Curricula*.

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] Loretta Sweet Jemmott, John B. Jemmott, and Konstance A. McCaffree, *Be Proud! Be Responsible!* Select Media, Inc., New York, New York, 1996, pp. 78, 79.

[13] *Focus on Kids*, University of Maryland, Department of Pediatrics, 1998, p. 137.

[14] Robert E. Rector, Melissa G. Pardue, and Shannan Martin, "What Do Parents Want Taught in Sex Education Programs?" *op. cit.*

[15] Shannan Martin et. al., *op. cit.*

About the Author



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Other Experts on this Issue

- [Christine Kim](#)

Efforts to redirect funds to programs deceptively labeled as support for "abstinence plus" or "comprehensive sex ed" would take funding away from abstinence education and increase teenage sex.

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